

# No Sign until the Burst of Fire

Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier

Thomas H. Johnson  
and  
M. Chris Mason

By 1932, British troops had been waging war of varying intensity with a group of intractable tribes along and beyond the northwestern frontier of India for nearly a century. That year, in summarizing a typical skirmish, one British veteran noted laconically, "Probably no sign till the burst of fire, and then the swift rush with knives, the stripping of the dead, and the unhurried mutilation of the infidels."<sup>1</sup> It was a savage, cruel, and peculiar kind of mountain warfare, frequently driven by religious zealotry on the tribal side, and it was singularly unforgiving of tactical error, momentary inattention, or cultural ignorance. It still is. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border region has experienced turbulence for centuries. Today a portion of it constitutes a significant threat to U.S. national security interests. The unique underlying factors that create this threat are little understood by most policymakers in Washington.

This region, which is almost certainly home to both Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has once again become a locus for a regenerating al-Qaida network. The July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on terrorist threats to the United States—an intelligence product known to analysts as the mildest common denominator everyone can agree on—corroborates this assessment.<sup>2</sup> The NIE states that al-Qaida, with uninterrupted funding from radical Saudi Arabian Wahabist sources, not only has

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1. General Sir Andrew Skeen, *Passing It On: Short Talks on Tribal Fighting in the Northwest Frontier of India*, 4th ed. (London: Gale, Polden, and Aldershot, 1939), p. 8.

2. An NIE is a finished intelligence report representing the consensus of all sixteen U.S. intelligence agencies. For an unclassified summary of this NIE, see Office of the Director of National In-

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rebuilt its command structure in the border region, but has continued to recruit and train operatives to infiltrate the United States and other Western countries.<sup>3</sup>

The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is 1,640 miles long, much of it spanning terrain so remote and so mountainous that it is virtually inaccessible. For Pakistan, instability extends beyond both endpoints. To the east, the border with China along “the roof of the world” runs 325 miles and separates Pakistan from China’s discontented Uighur Muslim minority in Sinkiang Province, a land once known as the independent Khanate of Kashgaria. Far to the west, Pakistan shares a 565-mile border with Iran, home on both sides to restless Baluchis and drug smugglers. Stretched on a map of the United States, the Pakistan-Afghanistan border would run from New York City to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Even in ancient times, the vast area that lies along this border served as both barrier and gateway and was a refuge for insurgents, smugglers, and bandits.

A portion of this border area continues to be home to a host of militant groups bent on exporting jihad. Foremost among them is the Taliban. Since retreating from Afghanistan following the U.S. invasion in October 2001, thousands of Taliban fighters and virtually the entire intact Taliban senior leadership shura (religious council) have found sanctuary in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) at the center of the border, as well as in parts of the Pakistani province of Baluchistan to the west and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) to the east and south. These areas coincide almost exactly with the area of Pakistan overwhelmingly dominated by the Pashtun ethnic group. The Taliban and the other Islamic extremist insurgent elements operating on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border are almost exclusively Pashtuns, with a sprinkling of radicals from nonborder ethnicities. The implications of this salient fact—that most of Pakistan’s and Afghanistan’s violent religious extremism, and with it much of the United States’ counterterrorism challenge, are centered within a single ethnolinguistic group—have not been fully grasped by a governmental policy community that has long downplayed cultural dynamics.

This article explores the reasons why religious and political extremism in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region ends neatly at the borders of the Pashtun lands. It begins with a brief overview of the geography and typography of the

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telligence, *The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland* (Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council, July 2007), [http://www.dni.gov/press\\_releases/20070717\\_release.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20070717_release.pdf).

3. See Tom A. Peter, “National Intelligence Estimate: Al Qaeda Stronger and a Threat to U.S. Homeland,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 19, 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0718/p99s01-duts.html>.

Figure 1. The Pakistan-Afghanistan Border and Frontier Area



SOURCE: U.S. Department of State, 2007.

border, followed by a condensed study of the key ethnographic and cultural factors. An understanding of the tribal and social framework of the border, particularly its alternative forms of governance, is critical to the subsequent discussion of the current instability and radicalization. In addition to religion, tribal mores that predate Islam shape insurgent behavior and should inform all aspects of engagement on both sides of the border. The article concludes with an examination of the history and the unintended consequences of border politics, and offers policy recommendations to begin to reverse the ongoing slide into Talibanization.

### *Geography of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Region*

The Pakistan-Afghanistan border region is a forbidding landscape of towering mountain ranges, narrow valleys, desert plains, and rocky, barren wasteland (see Figure 1). The topography alone makes the creation of an identifiable border nearly impossible. In the south, the border area begins on the tropical floor of the subcontinent and pushes northward into the three great mountain

ranges of Central Asia—the Himalaya, Pamir, and Hindu Kush. Part of the border lies within the monsoon belt of South Asia, but most of the area receives little rainfall. Nevertheless, some 30 million people still manage to eke a hard living out of this land.

According to Pakistani officials, two “established” border crossings handle the bulk of legal daily cross-border traffic: Torkham, in the north at the end of the Khyber Pass, and Chaman in the south. Both are manned by officials of the Pakistani customs service and the Federal Investigative Agency as well as by Levies.<sup>4</sup> Another twenty “frequented” border-crossing routes are manned by customs officials, Khassadars, and Levies.<sup>5</sup> There are also 111 “unfrequented” (illegal and known) and unmanned crossings in the north and 229 such crossing areas in the south.<sup>6</sup> Unaccounted for in this typology of border crossings are hundreds of foot and goat paths used by smugglers, locals, and nomads (i.e., Brahui and Afghan Kuchis),<sup>7</sup> who seasonally cross the border with their herds.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of these crossings are uncharted and are not monitored by either Islamabad or Kabul.

#### THE NORTHERN SECTION OF THE BORDER

We designate the northern portion of the border as extending from the Pamir mountain range pass at Mintaka in the Wakhan Corridor to the Gomal River in Paktika Province on the Afghan side of the border and South Waziristan on the Pakistani side (see Figure 2).<sup>9</sup> This 1,025-kilometer section of the border includes the northern Hindu Kush region and Afghanistan’s highest peak, Nowshak (24,557 feet/7,485 meters). The Safed Koh range, southeast of Kabul

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4. Levies, or Tribal Levies, are auxiliary police drawn from local clans. They are lightly armed, may wear uniforms, and receive scant if any training; their reliability is dubious at best.

5. Khassadars are tribal police who patrol the FATA. They generally arm themselves and do not wear uniforms. Khassadars nominally report to the Political Agent for their agency.

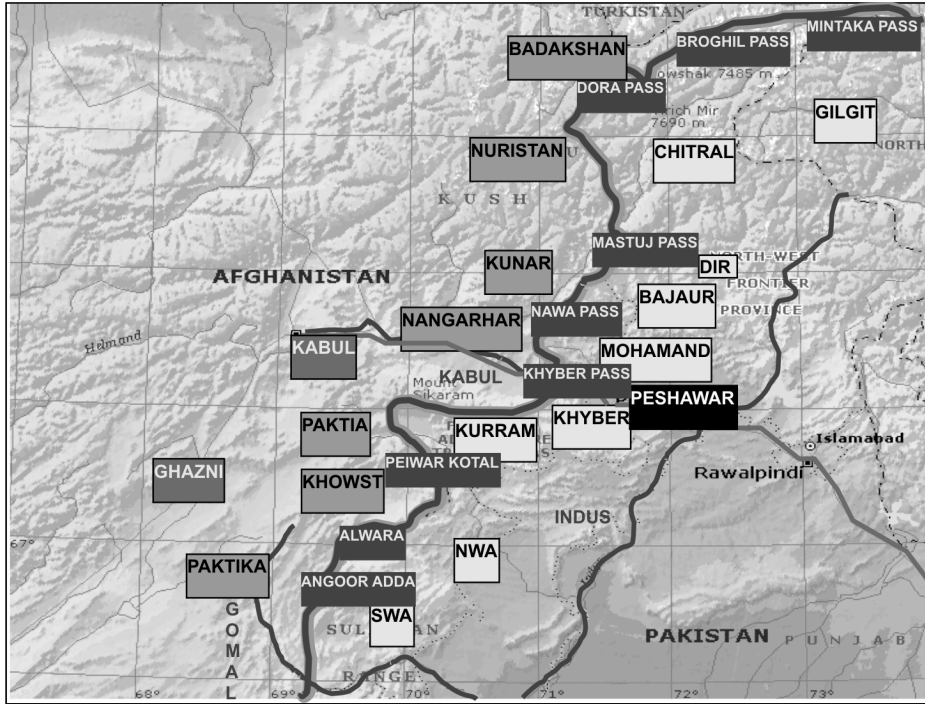
6. Senior Pakistani official, interview by authors, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, March 12, 2007.

7. In Urdu (Pakistan) the Kuchi are known as *powindahs*. The pastoral Kuchi once numbered an estimated 1 million persons. Dependent on migration to summer and winter pastures, they were decimated by the Soviet-Afghan war and the indiscriminate and unmarked sowing of approximately 6 million landmines by the Soviet Union at border crossing points. Perhaps 400,000 are semi- or fully nomadic today, and they remain the world’s largest nomadic group. In recognition of their numbers and the Kuchis’ place in Afghan society, seventeen seats in the lower house of the Afghan parliament are reserved for them. They dislike the Taliban intensely.

8. Numerous villages also straddle the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, presenting another dilemma. Several of these villages, such as Barabchah and Baluchistan, are cut in two by the border. While the border has always been artificial to Pashtuns who regularly transverse it, divided villages offer a relatively easy venue for crossing illegally into or out of Pakistan or Afghanistan. See Thomas H. Johnson, “On the Edge of the Big Muddy: The Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May 2007), pp. 114–115.

9. The border segmentation presented here corresponds to Pakistani Army Corps areas of operation, specifically, the 11th Corps in the north (headquartered in Peshawar) and the 12th Corps in the south (headquartered in Quetta).

Figure 2. Northern Portion of Pakistan-Afghanistan Border



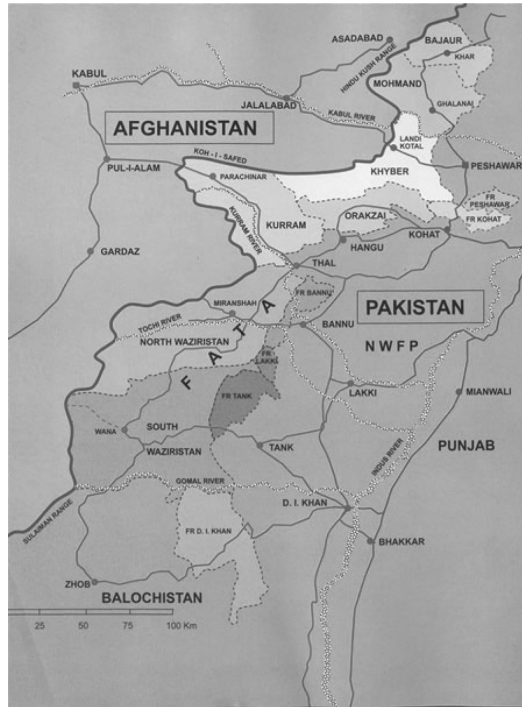
SOURCE: Senior Pakistani official, interview by authors, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, March 12, 2007.

and west of Peshawar, Pakistan, includes the approach area to the Khyber Pass with its summit at Landi Kotal near the Afghan border town of Torkham.

The northern portion of the border contains the Afghan provinces of Badakshan, Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Paktia, and Paktika; all seven agencies of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area; and a portion of the NWFP. The FATA runs north to south along this northern section of the border and forms a Massachusetts-sized wedge between Afghanistan and the NWFP (see Figure 3). It has a population of 3.2 to 4.0 million people, virtually all of whom are Pashtuns.<sup>10</sup>

10. Perhaps 1,000 ethnic Urmurs, or Ormurs, live in the vicinity of Kaniguram northwest of Dera Ismail Khan in Waziristan, surrounded by Mahsud Pashtuns. They speakOrmuri, an Indo-European language, which is also spoken by a few families in Baraki-Barak in Logar Province, Afghanistan.

Figure 3. Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area



SOURCE: "Welcome to FATA," <http://www.fata.gov.pk/>.

#### THE SOUTHERN SECTION OF THE BORDER

The 1,200-kilometer-long southern section of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border stretches from the Gomal River to the Pakistan-Iran border at Robat (see Figure 4). The major political division on the Pakistan side of this section is the province of Baluchistan. On the Afghan side, from east to west, are Zabul, Kandahar, Helmand, and Nimruz Provinces.

Baluchistan, which derives its name from its indigenous Baluch ethnic group, is Pakistan's largest yet least populous province. It includes designated tribal areas in the Kohlu District, home to two of the largest and most intractable Baluchi tribes—the Bugtis and the Marris. Quetta, the provincial capital, is the only significant city.

Lying outside the monsoon belt and with few rivers, northern Baluchistan largely consists of desert basins, arid hills, and low mountains. In premodern times, this region was known as Registan, the "Land of Sand."



### *Ethnography of the Border Area*

The portion of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region discussed in this article is home to dozens of ethnic groups and languages. The largest group by far is made up of the Pashtun tribes that inhabit the center,<sup>11</sup> but the region is also home to Baluchis, Ketrans, Nuristanis, Brahui, Munjis, Chitralis, Shinas, Gujaris, Hazaras, Kowars, Savis, Tajiks, Hindkos, Dameli, Kalamis, Urmurs, and Wahkis, as well as to the Gawar-Batis, Badeshi, Khirgiz, and Burushos, among others—each of whom speaks a distinct language, in some cases with dozens of mutually unintelligible subdialects. Of all these ethnic groups, however, only the Pashtuns have ever demonstrated an interest in the type of jihad being waged by the Taliban.

The vast majority of these groups are Muslims of the Hanafi Sunni tradition. A tiny minority of Pashtuns are Shiites, principally clustered in the Kurram river valley in Kurram Agency of the FATA. Virtually all members of the Turi tribe of the Karlanri Pashtuns in that valley are Shiites, as are some Bangash, Chamkanni, and Orakzai clans. (Small Pashtun Shiite communities also dot southern Afghanistan, including two groups in Kandahar Province.) In addition, there are vestigial pockets of non-Muslim groups in the northern section of the border, including the Kalash people living on the Durand line in the northern Chitral. The Nuristani tribes of Nuristan Province in eastern Afghanistan were among the last peoples in the border region to convert to Islam, in their case about 100 years ago during the Afghan reign of Abdul Rahman, dubbed the “Iron Emir.” The Nuristanis still sometimes use animist gravesite effigies, which are prohibited in Islam, suggesting that they have grafted Islamic beliefs onto existing traditional customs. This is also true of the Pashtuns, where Hanafi Sunni beliefs are layered over a much older social code.

The southern section of the border is home to three major ethnic groups. Beginning at the Pishin hills and running east to the FATA live Pashtuns of the Ghurghusht and Karlanri tribes. Quetta lies on an ethnic boundary, roughly half Baluch and half Pashtun. To the west of Quetta live Baluchis and the Brahui. The Brahui speak a Dravidian language and were once a major power in the region of Kalat under the rule of the hereditary khan of Kalat.<sup>12</sup> Today

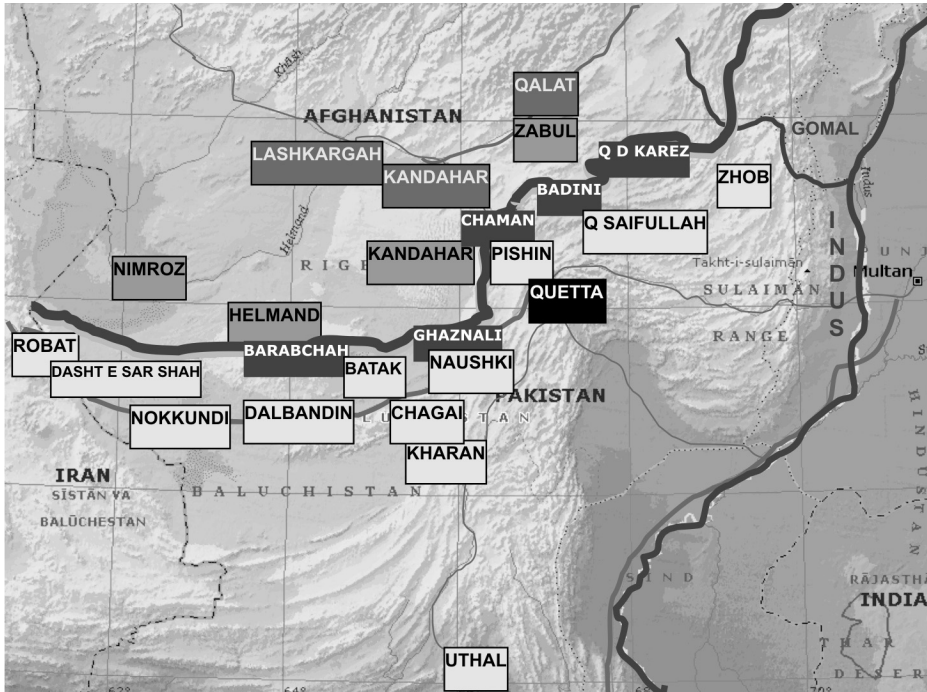
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11. Militants located in the Pashtun-majority regions of Pakistan are closely tied to the Pashtun regions of eastern and southern Afghanistan.

12. Kalat briefly asserted independence from Pakistan in 1948. The British signed a treaty with the khan of Kalat in 1854, which made the khanate nominally subordinate to the Indian government, but the British maintained control over this region only after granting substantial autonomy to the khan.



Figure 4. Southern Portion of Pakistan-Afghanistan Border



SOURCE: Senior Pakistani official, interview by authors, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, March 12, 2007.

they consist of sedentary, semi- and fully nomadic clans that are slowly assimilating into the cultures around them. They are a peaceful pastoral people who have subsisted for centuries in a harsh environment by raising the herding of sheep to a science. The Brahui have shown no interest in the Taliban or its creed.

## THE BALUCHIS

The Baluchis are the dominant force from Quetta to the Iranian border.<sup>13</sup> Like the Pashtuns, Baluchis have a distinct cultural identity and have traditionally resisted internal meddling. Many of their social values are similar to those of the neighboring Pashtun. Unlike the acephalous Pashtun, however, the Baluchi clans recognize chiefs, called *sardars*, and invest them with leadership author-

13. The Baluch, like the Pashtun, are predominantly Sunni, with most belonging to the Hanifi School of Islamic jurisprudence.

ity. Although the position is hereditary, a *sardar* must consistently demonstrate wise, strong, and just leadership; a *sardar* who fails to do so may forfeit his position. The Baluchis revolted against the Pakistani government in 1973, when, shortly after the discovery of major natural gas and mineral reserves underneath their land, Islamabad revoked the authority of the *sardars* to administer their own peoples and moved to take control of their lands. Over the next five years, the Pakistani government deployed nearly six full divisions to suppress an estimated 55,000 Baluchi fighters. Selig Harrison documented the extensive use of napalm against Baluchi villages during this period.<sup>14</sup> By the time the fighting ended in 1978, at least 5,000 Baluchi fighters and 3,000 Pakistani Army personnel were dead, in addition to uncounted thousands of Baluchi noncombatants. Since then, insurgency has flared up repeatedly, with guerrillas targeting oil pipelines and security personnel. A low-level insurgency continues in 2008 with sporadic attacks on Pakistani government targets.

In the colonial period, the British did not attempt to disrupt the *sardari* culture. To the contrary, the region became practically synonymous with Robert Sandeman, a brilliant but mercurial administrator whose methods of working within the Baluchi culture were so successful they became known as the Sandeman system. As historian David Gilmour described it, "The Sandeman system seemed simple. You made friends with the tribes, you dealt with them through their chiefs, you paid tribesmen to patrol your communications, you adhered to tribal custom and settled disputes by jirgas and not through law courts. You tried to solve all problems peacefully but you kept an effective military force ready and visible; and from time to time you extended your control by the construction of roads and forts."<sup>15</sup> Sandeman's system worked well, and the Baluchis remained testy but not insurgent. In fact, the British enlisted many Baluchis into native regiments. Curiously, so too did the Sultanate of Oman, which governed parts of Baluchistan prior to Indian independence and partition, and which still has an agreement with Pakistan to recruit Baluchis in Baluchistan for Oman's army. (At the time of Oman's independence in 1970, virtually the entire army was composed of Baluchis.<sup>16</sup>)

The goals of the Baluchi insurgency remain greater autonomy, reinstatement of the Baluchis' tribal land rights and the authority of the *sardars*, and the dis-

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14. Selig S. Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baluch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981).

15. David Gilmour, *The Ruling Caste: Imperial Lives in the Victorian Raj* (London: Pimlico, 2007), p. 171.

16. Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, "Child Soldiers: CRC Country Briefs," report prepared for the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 28th sess., September 24–October 10, 2001.

tribution of resources in Baluchistan to the Baluchis. The Baluchis' grievances are not without merit; few of the Pakistani government's rural development projects funded with the revenues from the province's natural resources have reached the Baluchi people. In contrast to its policy toward the Taliban, however, the Pakistani government has pursued a course of massive military suppression of the Baluchi insurgency since 1973.

#### THE PASHTUNS

Although there is some dispute about the origins of the Pashtun ethnic group, anthropologists generally agree that the tribes that make up this group first moved into the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region about 1,000 years ago, from the area around Ghor. According to tradition, members of the Pashtun Hill Tribes who inhabit the FATA are descendents of Karlan, a foundling adopted as the fourth son of Qais Abdur Rashid, a contemporary of the Prophet Mohammed and the ur-ancestor of the Pashtun ethnic group. The Hill Tribes, or Karlanri, include many of the most warlike tribes, such as the Afridis, Dairs, Jadrans, Ketrans, Mahsuds, Mohmands, and Waziris. Of all the Pashtun tribes, the Waziris of greater Waziristan (a region that includes North Waziristan Agency, South Waziristan Agency, and the Bermol District of Afghanistan's Paktika Province) are reputed to be the most conservative and irascible. The Waziris pride themselves on never having paid taxes to any sovereign and never having their lands, which they consider veiled, or in *purdah*, conquered.<sup>17</sup> (Considered good but unreliable fighters by the British during the colonial era, the Waziris and several other tribes were prohibited de facto from enlisting in native regiments of the Indian Army.)

Historically, the rural Pashtuns have dominated their neighbors and have avoided subjugation or integration by a larger nation. As one elderly Pashtun tribesman told Mountstuart Elphinstone, a British official visiting Afghanistan in 1809, "We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood . . . we will never be content with a master."<sup>18</sup> This characteristic makes Pashtuns the perfect insurgents.

With more than 25 million members, the Pashtun represent one of the largest tribal groups in the world.<sup>19</sup> They are not, however, homogeneous, and determining who is a Pashtun is often a matter of contention. There are, for example, tribes that are ethnically Pashtun but that pretend not to be and speak

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17. See Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

18. Quoted in Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (New York: Da Capo, 2002), p. 134.

19. Tribal population estimate from Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2007 (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 2006).

Dari; other tribes that are not of Pashtun descent claim to be and speak Pashto. All Pashtuns, however, profess descent from the eponymous Qais. Entire volumes have been written to explore this claim, and the issue of Pashtun genealogy remains contentious. What is important for policymakers is that this descent is an article of faith in the Pashtun narrative.

As an ethnicity, the Pashtuns, who are also called Pahktuns, Pushtoons, Afghans, and occasionally Pathans in Pakistan and India, may be loosely clustered into five major groupings: the Durrani tribes, the Ghilzai (or Ghalji) tribes, the Sarbani or Eastern tribes, the Ghurghusht tribes, and the Karlanri (or Karlani), sometimes referred to as the Hill Tribes. Experts suggest there are about 350 major tribes in these five general groupings.<sup>20</sup> Relationships between them dating back hundreds of years are complex and complicated by feuds, disputes, ancient alliances, and political marriages. The best documented of the many fault lines running through Pashtun society is the 300-year-old conflict between the Durrani and Ghilzai tribes in Afghanistan, a conflict that forms one of the underlying reasons for the struggle between the Taliban and the government of Hamid Karzai.<sup>21</sup>

The Pashtun are perhaps the most highly segmentary ethnic group in the world. Each of the approximately 350 tribes has a large number of clans, or *khels*, descending from it. (Some *khels*, such as the Suleiman Khel of the Ghilzais, are so large that they have an additional layer of sub-*khels*.) The *khels* in turn are divided into large extended family groups called *kahols*. Depending on their size, a varying number of nuclear families, or *koranays*, make up the *kahol*.<sup>22</sup> All Pashtuns speak Pashto, or its harsher dialect of Pahkto. Both Pashto and Pahkto have many regional dialects; communication difficulties are not unknown between them.

Pashtuns identify themselves in terms of their familial ties and commitments, and have a fundamentally different way of looking at the world. As the preeminent Afghan scholar M. Jamil Hanifi wrote in 1978: "The Afghan individual is surrounded . . . by concentric rings consisting of family, extended family, clan, tribe, confederacy, and major cultural-linguistic group. The hierarchy of loyalties corresponds to these circles and becomes more intense as the circle gets smaller . . . seldom does an Afghan, regardless of cultural background, need the services and/or the facilities of the national government. Thus, in case of crisis, his recourse is to the kinship and, if necessary, the larger

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20. See Dupree, *Afghanistan*; and Sir Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1958).

21. See Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Orbis*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 71–89.

22. For a breakdown of the tribal division within the Pashtun ethnic group, see Caroe, *The Pathans*.

cultural group. National feelings and loyalties are filtered through the successive layers."<sup>23</sup>

Pashtuns engage in social, political, and economic activities within these concentric rings; this engagement prevents government-oriented institutions from gaining a foothold in tribal areas.<sup>24</sup> This segmentation is one reason why, historically, no foreign entity—whether Alexander, the British, the Soviets, the Afghans, or the Pakistanis—has been able to reconcile the Pashtun to external rule.<sup>25</sup> During the nineteenth century, at the height of its imperial power, Great Britain struggled and failed to subject the Pashtuns to state authority.<sup>26</sup> Even the most brutal of these foreign incursions, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, failed to subjugate the Pashtuns—despite genocidal military tactics and a massive commitment of military personnel and firepower that killed more than a million Pashtuns and drove at least 3 million more into exile in Pakistan and Iran.<sup>27</sup>

For centuries this frontier has fascinated Western observers, beginning with British East India Company officials who began to explore the region in the late eighteenth century. They were followed by generations of Victorian explorers, administrators, and soldiers who, unable to penetrate and subdue it, instead wove a complex mythology around its people. But a review of the literature and historiography of the region shows a pervasive British bias toward depictions of the Pashtun border tribes as warlike, brave, and stoic—worthy adversaries for generations of Victorians, as Mukulika Banerjee pointed out.<sup>28</sup> A century of British fascination and amateur anthropology, which spawned such romantic theories as the native Pashtun peoples being descendents of the lost tribes of Israel, and which reached their peak in Rudyard Kipling's celebrated novel *Kim*, has obscured a more complex if less romantic social reality.

The obstinacy of the Pashtun tribes and the inability of the British Empire to control them led to a border policy of "masterly inactivity" that essentially used the tribesmen as a buffer between India's northern frontier and the approaching Russian Empire in Central Asia. Successive Pakistani and Afghan

23. M. Jamil Hanifi, quoted in Erika Knabe, "Frauenemanzipation in Afghanistan: e empir. Beitr. zur Unters. von soziokulturellem Wandel u. soziokulturellen Beständigkeit" [Women's emancipation: An empirical article about sociocultural development and consistency] (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1977), p. 13.

24. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, p. 415.

25. See *ibid.*

26. See Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha America, 1992).

27. David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

28. Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the Northwest Frontier* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 38–39.

governments were no more successful than the British or the Russians, and the designation of this region as a kind of tribal no man's land over generations created the loose political system of tribal autonomy in the FATA seen today.<sup>29</sup> Indeed the name for this area is actually a misnomer. It is not federally administered in any sense of the word.<sup>30</sup> Constitutionally, Islamabad has never maintained legal jurisdiction over more than 100 meters to the left and right of the few paved roads in the tribal areas.

### *Insurgency and Pashtun Tribal Structures in History*

The Taliban is neither unique nor a new phenomenon to the Pashtun border area. Historically, many jihadi groups and charismatic religious leaders similar to the Taliban have arisen from this area at generational intervals to challenge governments on both sides of the border. For example, a figure remarkably similar to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, Mirza Ali Khan—a Tori Khel Waziri Pashtun known to the West as the Fakir of Ipi—led British and later Pakistani security forces on a frustrating chase around the frontier for thirty years.<sup>31</sup> Protected by his Pashtun tribal supporters in the mountains, he was never caught. Another charismatic religious leader, the Mullah of Hadda, provoked the Great Pashtun Revolt of 1897 through a combination of mysticism, parlor tricks, and promises to turn British bullets to water.<sup>32</sup> The “Hindustani Fanatics” movement troubled the British for decades. There were so many apparently spontaneous jihads led by illiterate charismatic mullahs that the British frontier administrators of the Victorian era dubbed them “mad mullah movements.” The current manifestation of this phenomenon, however, did not arise spontaneously, but was deliberately encouraged by the Pakistani government.

This radical Pakistani policy of playing with fire began with the subversion of Pashtun tribal structures in the early 1970s and accelerated dramatically after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. After the extremists took over political control of a district, the system of elders meetings and jirgas would be replaced with conservative politico-religious leadership cells comprising local

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29. See Hopkirk, *The Great Game*; and Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 76.

30. As pointed out by Rahimullah Yusufzai, “Pakistani courts and police have no jurisdiction in the tribal areas.” See Yusufzai, “Analysis: Pakistan’s Tribal Frontiers,” *BBC News*, December 14, 2001. For an overview of the political administration and control of the FATA, see the website maintained by the Pakistan government, <http://www.fata.gov.pk/index.php?link?3>.

31. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, pp. 480, 487, 491–492.

32. David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 144, 169–170.



mullahs known as “ulemas.”<sup>33</sup> Because of the length of the Taliban regime’s tenure in Afghanistan and its (nonregime) insurgent durability since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, the Taliban has been more successful than most previous jihadi movements in the region in consolidating and embedding these social changes. Therein lies the danger, because with the exception of the Hindustan Fanatics group of the mid-nineteenth century, most such mad mullah movements of the past have been of such relatively short duration or limited territorial scope that they made little lasting impact on tribal structures and mechanisms.

This susceptibility of the people of the region to such religious insurgencies, and their resistance to external governmental control, have been ascribed by some observers to tribal culture, or simply a response to chronic poverty and underdevelopment.<sup>34</sup> Yet all of the ethnic groups of the border region have in common the same key elements of segmentary, patrilineal tribal organization, and the same endemic poverty, so tribalism and tribal social structure alone cannot account for this insurgent behavior.

Another of the most frequent and more facile observations applied by Western intelligence analysts to this region is that these areas are “ungoverned.” Indeed, this observation has helped to create the central pillar of the international effort in Afghanistan since 2001, which is to “extend the reach of the central government” into these areas.<sup>35</sup> This is a dangerous and fundamentally bankrupt approach, however, arrived at by misguided bureaucrats, policy analysts, and Westernized Afghan elites, who are the first to downplay the importance of tribalism and the Pashtun tribal code known as Pashtunwali. Indeed, the misleading assurances of such elites, often the only contacts of Western policy professionals, have been instrumental in drawing critical understanding away from tribal realities. The prescription of extending the reach of the central government is, in fact, precisely the wrong answer to apply to a

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33. Ulema are persons educated in the teachings of Islam. Technically, the word means the body of educated religious men in a given area, but more narrowly it is taken to mean the local group of *mullawan* and *maulvis* who make up a shura, a new phenomenon in the region.

34. See Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam, and Nationalism: Muslim Politics in the North-West Frontier Province, 1937–47* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999); and William S. McCallister, “Strategic Design Considerations for Operations in Pakistan’s Tribal Areas: Dust-up along the North-West Frontier,” *Small Wars Journal*, January 2008, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/01/operations-in-pakistans-tribal/>.

35. See, for example, Lt. Gen. David W. Barno, U.S. Army (ret.), “Afghanistan on the Brink: Where Do We Go from Here?” testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 110th Cong., 1st sess., February 15, 2007, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/bar021507.htm>; and Ann Scott Tyson, “General: No U.S. Troop Cuts in Afghanistan This Year,” *Seattle Times*, September 22, 2006, [http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/2003270419\\_troops22.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/2003270419_troops22.html).



highly developed culture in which “central government” is anathema and reaction to it is insurgency: the fact that the insurgency in Afghanistan has grown steadily in intensity, lethality, and amount of territory under Taliban control every year since this policy was enshrined is not a coincidence.

The absence of Western state structures of governance in large swathes of the tribal areas should not be conflated, as the policy described above does, with the absence of governance. Complex and sophisticated conflict-resolution mechanisms, legal codes, and alternative forms of governance have developed in the region over a millennia. Moreover, the rural Pashtuns prefer their own mechanisms to alien, external ones because, in their perceptions, theirs are clearly superior. Depictions of the frontier as a lawless land of endless feuds and bloodthirsty tribal raids owe more to Victorian romanticism than to objective reality. To be sure, parts of the region, particularly those dominated by the Pashtuns, are often witness to bloodshed and are not infrequently hobbled by feuds. Yet despite poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, maternal and infant mortality, and human longevity rates at or near the worst in the world, when not subjected to external pressure, most of the Pashtuns are peaceful pastoralists and subsistence farmers in a feudal economy who have few of the rising economic interests historically present in people’s revolutions.<sup>36</sup> Revolution, when it has come to southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, has therefore historically been less economically driven, as it is in many cases in other parts of the world, than culturally and religiously driven. Thus it is a dangerous mistake to misinterpret or dismiss the cultural customs that have so frequently conjured Pashtun jihads against nationally based forms of governance.

### *Invasion of Afghanistan and a Safe Haven in the FATA*

The invasion of Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, spurred an influx of Taliban and al-Qaida militants into the FATA that would eventually result in the consolidation of extremist control in the region. Attempts by the Pakistani government after September 11 to exert military control proved costly in both lives and political capital. Several hundred Pakistani Army personnel were killed in the fighting between 2004 and 2007, most victims of ambushes, mines, or a general lack of experience in counterinsurgency. It was this failure of the Pakistani Army to bring the FATA under military control that compelled Pervez Musharraf’s regime to change tack and pursue several “peace deals” with cowed tribal leaders fronting for the Taliban

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36. Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 166–175.

leadership in Waziristan in 2004, 2005, and 2006. News reports suggested that the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, played a role in crafting the terms and inducing a number of tribal figures to sign the 2006 accord.<sup>37</sup> Under the terms of the 2006 deal, known as the Miranshah “peace agreement” of North Waziristan, the Pakistani Army released all prisoners it had taken in the previous fighting in the area, returned all weapons seized, and paid reparations for all damages caused by the Pakistani Army. In addition, the army agreed to cease its patrols and to dismantle all of its temporary checkpoints within the FATA, as well as to withdraw all of its troops to large established garrisons in a few significant towns and along important crossroads. In exchange, militant religious leaders who signed the agreement, such as Nek Mohammed,<sup>38</sup> promised not to shelter foreign militants—a promise they claimed almost immediately they had never made. By August 2007 the “peace deal” had publicly collapsed; the policy of appeasement was beyond spin control; and the Musharraf regime had lurched back to the military option it had abandoned just a year earlier with no clear idea of what to try next.

Widespread political assassinations, terrorist attacks, and periods of intense combat with Pakistani military and paramilitary forces since the arrival of Afghan Taliban in early 2002 have made the border area Pakistan’s most radicalized and most troubling. An analysis of the fighting in Waziristan in mid-2007 between rival Taliban commanders provides evidence of the extent to which FATA’s seven agencies have been “Talibanized.”<sup>39</sup> When intense fighting broke out in Waziristan shortly after the Pakistan government concluded the 2006 peace deal and pulled back its troops, Pakistani officials depicted it as a case of the tribal leaders taking on foreign fighters themselves. They portrayed the clashes to the Western press and Western diplomats as proof that the peace agreement was already working to empower tribal leaders, when in fact the fighting was proof of the exact opposite, and indeed suggested that the Taliban were consolidating their control of Waziristan.

In reality, the battles in question occurred not between locals and foreign fighters, as the Pakistani government sought to portray, but rather between two rival Taliban mullahs: Mullah Nazir and Mullah Omar (not Mullah

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37. Massoud Ansari and Colin Freeman, “Omar Role in Truce Reinforces Fears That Pakistan ‘Caved In’ to Taliban,” *Telegraph*, September 9, 2006. See also Tarique Niazi, “Pakistan’s Peace Deal with Taliban Militants,” *Terrorism Monitor*, October 5, 2006.

38. Nek Mohammed was killed by a Hellfire missile fired from a Predator drone in 2007 after publicly humiliating President Musharraf.

39. “Talibanization” can generally be defined as growing extremist influence in daily Pakistani life that mimics the type of public implementation of sharia (Islamic law) that was seen in Afghanistan after the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s.

Mohammed Omar, the leader of the Taliban, but a less prominent figure of the same name, whom we call “Mullah Omar the Lesser” to avoid confusion). Mullah Nazir created this rivalry by seizing the leadership of the Ahmadzai Waziris from Mullah Omar the Lesser, who had brought a small radical splinter group of Uzbeks under his wing. Mullah Omar the Lesser’s Uzbeks then killed two al-Qaida operatives in Waziristan, Saiful Asad and Sheikh Asadullah (a Saudi bagman), both guests of Mullah Nazir and therefore under his protection. The killings sparked a round of combat to eliminate the splinter group. Between 90 and 95 percent of the 1,000 to 2,000 Uzbek radicals in the FATA, however—those outside the splinter group—were unaffected by this round of consolidation of Taliban command and control.

Since 2001 the Taliban has targeted Waziri tribal leaders through a combination of assassination and intimidation. More than 200 tribal elders who resisted Taliban domination were reported murdered by Taliban agents in the FATA in 2005 and 2006.<sup>40</sup> This case demonstrates not only the extent to which the Taliban dominates the political space in Waziristan,<sup>41</sup> but also the extent to which information coming out of the FATA through official Pakistani channels has been manipulated for Western consumption.

In 2007 the “Talibanization” spreading outward from the FATA across northern Pakistan began to receive some belated attention in Western policy circles. Talibanization has been focused largely on the Pashtun areas, where militants have targeted video stores, girls’ schools, and other institutions that they perceive as immoral. Islamic extremists have also publicly moved to challenge government authority and promote radical ideologies. Since 2006 Talibanization has expanded even to Peshawar, the relatively modern capital of the NWFP. When similar acts of intimidation began to occur in Islamabad, culminating in the commando raid against the Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) on July 29, 2007, they should have served as a national and international wake-up call. The unchecked, and apparently uncheckable, ability of extremists to promote Talibanization is a source of distress for many Pakistanis and led to criticism of the Musharraf regime for its inability, or unwillingness, to take effective action against them.<sup>42</sup> The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which President Musharraf made the official opposition party in the Pakistani

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40. Carlotta Gall and Ismail Khan, “Taliban and Allies Tighten Grip in North of Pakistan,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2006.

41. K. Alan Kronstadt, “Pakistan-U.S. Relations,” CRS Report for Congress (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, updated October 18, 2007), Order Code RL33498, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33498.pdf>.

42. Abbas Memkari, “Extremism and All Types of Ups and Downs” *Jang*, April 1, 2007.

Parliament after the 2002 elections, provides political cover to the extremists, openly supports the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, and maintains close ties to its leadership.<sup>43</sup>

With the collaboration of elements within one of Pakistan's secret intelligence services, the ISI, the Pashtun borderlands have become a safe haven for the Taliban and other insurgent and terrorist elements. Since 2002 the FATA, in particular, has provided a sanctuary for a growing insurgent network that has struck Afghanistan with a vengeance.<sup>44</sup> It provides an almost impregnable base for command and control, fundraising, recruiting, training, and launching and recovery of military operations and terrorist attacks.<sup>45</sup> Growing outward from the FATA, extremism has spread across the Pashtun belt, and Pashtun tribal areas in both Pakistan and Afghanistan are increasingly falling under the de facto political control of the extremists. The Taliban and its associated groups have used murder, arson, intimidation, bombings, and a sophisticated information campaign to subvert traditional tribal governance structures.

### *Pashtunwali: The Pashtun Social Code*

Why have the Pashtuns provided a safe haven for the Taliban and al-Qaida, while their neighbors along the same border have proven so resistant to such religious radicalization? The issues fueling the low-intensity insurgency of the Baluchis, for example, primarily involve self-determination and resource allocation, not religious extremism. The Taliban find no home among them. Similarly for the restive Uighurs at the extreme eastern end of the border region in western China, the issue is cultural survival and ethnic separatism, not radical Islam. The Chitralis, while occupying lands as harsh and mountainous as those of the Pashtuns, continue to welcome foreign visitors and want nothing to do with the Taliban. Nor is the difference religious; with the minor exceptions noted earlier, all of the people of the border have internalized a devout and conservative—if conceptually weak—understanding of Hanafi Sunni

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43. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal is a coalition of religious political parties that, after the October 2002 provincial elections, formed a pro-Islamist coalition government in Baluchistan and a government in the NWFP. The MMA was soundly defeated in the NWFP in February 2008 by the ANP.

44. For data showing that the Taliban had a permanent political and military presence in 54 percent of Afghanistan, see Senlis Council, *Stumbling into Chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink* (London: Senlis Council, November 2007), [http://www.senliscouncil.net/modules/publications/Afghanistan\\_on\\_the\\_brink](http://www.senliscouncil.net/modules/publications/Afghanistan_on_the_brink).

45. From north to south, the seven agencies are Bajaur, Momand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, North Waziristan, and South Waziristan (see Figure 3).

Islam. For all other ethnicities of the border region, the Taliban's ideology and radical violence in the name of Islam are equally anathema.

The explanation for the Pashtuns' provision of safe haven to the Taliban and al-Qaida lies in their unique social code, known as Pashtunwali: a set of values and unwritten, but universally understood, precepts that define Pashtun culture. Pashtunwali, literally translated, means "the way of the Pashtun." For U.S. policymakers seeking to address the challenges of the Pashtun tribal areas, an understanding of the core principles of this cultural value system is crucial.

Pashtunwali is the keystone of the Pashtuns' identity and social structure, and it shapes all forms of behavior from the cradle to the grave. Its rules are largely responsible for the survival of the Pashtun tribes for more than 1,000 years, but they remain little understood in the West. As Charles Allen writes, "[Pashtunwali is] an uncompromising social code so profoundly at odds with Western mores that its application constantly brings one up with a jolt."<sup>46</sup> A Pashtun must adhere to this code to maintain his honor and retain his identity. The worst obscenity one Pashtun can call another is *dauz*, or "person with no honor." In a closed, interdependent rural society, a Pashtun family without honor becomes a pariah, unable to compete for advantageous marriages or economic opportunities, and shunned by the other families as a disgrace to the clan. Pashtunwali also provides a legal framework for social interaction. As James Spain writes, "Despite the fact that it has perpetuated the blood feud, [Pashtunwali] provides for what is probably the maximum amount of law and order in a society of warrior tribes. While it is true that for the most part it is the individual who acts on the code, the community at large judges with remarkable unanimity the righteousness of his action and supports it or opposes it. [Pashtunwali] is still by all odds the strongest force in the tribal area, and the hill [Pashtuns] . . . accepts no law but their own."<sup>47</sup>

Intrinsically flexible and dynamic, Pashtunwali has core tenets that include self-respect, independence, justice, hospitality, forgiveness, and tolerance. Not all Pashtuns embody the ideal type defined by Pashtunwali, but all respect its core values and admire—if sometimes grudgingly—those who do. When hillmen come down out of the mountains to buy staples in the bazaar of a valley town, with their long fighting knives visible in their waistbands, the towns-

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46. Charles Allen, *Soldier Sahibs: The Daring Adventurers Who Tamed India's Northwest Frontier* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2000), p. 13. See also John C. Griffiths, *Afghanistan: A History of Conflict* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 59; and James W. Spain, *The People of the Khyber: The Pathans of Pakistan* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), pp. 46–47.

47. James W. Spain, *The Pathan Borderland* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963), p. 68.

people are likely to sneak admiring glances and mutter something to their friends about “real Pashtuns.”

This division between highland Pashtuns and those living in the better lands at lower elevations is another major fault line running through Pashtun society. Akbar Ahmed has termed this the divide between *nang* and *qalang* cultures: *nang* referring to the honor code of the hillmen, and *qalang* referring to the superior, irrigated farmlands of the valley historically susceptible to taxation.<sup>48</sup> This divide is the source of the Pashtun proverb that “honor ate up the mountains, and taxes ate up the plains.” Insurgency in Afghanistan has always sprung from the hills, fostered by the *nang* culture, and the Taliban is no exception.

Pashtunwali imposes on Pashtun society a set of critical obligations. In general terms, Pashtunwali is the sum total of the tribes’ collective expectations of their members to conform to the norms and customs that ensure the group’s survival as a distinct sociocultural entity. In the perceptions of most Pashtuns, group consensus remains the primary source of power, and the *salah-mashwarah*, or “discussion,” is the main forum where all important issues are discussed and resolved. For matters of particular gravity or consequence, such as murders or treaty negotiations, a *jirga*—a traditional assembly of all the tribes’ adult male members—may be called, but this is not a simple matter. The egalitarian character of the *jirga* and the *salah-mashwarah* are in direct contrast with a hierarchical state power structure. Both are driven by the consensus of the group, composed of equal individuals. It is understood that representation is a bottom-up structure, operating within a system based on the concept of equality.<sup>49</sup>

Pashtunwali is essentially self-enforcing. All Pashtuns embrace it, and all accept the finality of the *jirga* process as the impartial arbiter of tribal law. Although the ultimate meeting of elders at which judgment is finalized is often conflated with the word “*jirga*,” that meeting is only a ritual capstone. The *jirga*, when called to resolve a conflict, is not a singular event, but rather a complex sequence of events in a protracted, consultative, and deliberative process that may take months to conclude. The adjudication of an accidental killing within a *khel*, for example, typically begins with the selection of a committee of elders who are deputized to function as a combination of judge and jury for the matter. They begin by ritually placing a rock between the homes of the af-

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48. Akbar S. Ahmed, *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* (London: Routledge, 2004).

49. Jolanta Sierakowska-Dyndo, “Tribalism and Afghan Political Traditions” (Warsaw: Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, January 2003), [http://www.wgssr.uw.edu.pl/pub/uploads/aps04/5Sierakowska-Dyndo\\_Tribalism.pdf](http://www.wgssr.uw.edu.pl/pub/uploads/aps04/5Sierakowska-Dyndo_Tribalism.pdf).

fected parties. This step, known as *tigah*, or “placing the stone,” provides an inviolable truce period in which the selected elders conduct investigations, discussions, and deliberations. They will meet many times to establish the facts, visit both households to obtain the commitment of both families to bind themselves into the process and respect its outcome, call witnesses, hear evidence, and consider compensatory options. Deliberations may go on for days, and the final decision must be unanimous, as no man may be bound by a decision he does not accept. Fairness and collective justice are the ultimate good, not punishment of the individual wrongdoer in the Western sense, which for the Pashtuns is essentially an alien concept. When a settlement is arrived at, it is vetted with both families prior to the final meeting at which judgment is pronounced, allowing families time to reconcile younger, more hotheaded members to the decision. The judgment will keep within valuative norms established by tradition and may involve the transfer of land, money, or a female family member to the aggrieved family in compensation. At no time, even at the capstone meeting, do members of the two families appear in the same room at the same time.

Rejection of the settlement by either family is rare. Noncompliance with the judgment, however, means excommunication from the village. The usual remedy for a family that rejects the terms and attempts to remain in place is to have its home(s) burned down.

Pashtunwali is neither the absence of governance, nor summary judgment, nor a lynch mob at work. Rather, it is an alternative form of social organization with an advanced conflict resolution mechanism that does not involve court-houses, jails, lawyers, law schools, bailiffs, county clerks, prisons, prison guards, judges, or policemen. It has been estimated that jirgas resolve 95 percent of the cases in which they are invoked.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps most important for U.S. security interests in the region, the millions of tribesmen who live within this system have no desire to have a new, alien system imposed on them by outsiders. Furthermore, Pashtuns are generally convinced that their system of social order produces men superior to those of the Western model. While justice and responsibility are collective, however, at the individual level, Pashtunwali encompasses four central personal values: freedom, honor, revenge, and chivalry.

For a Pashtun male, Pashtunwali is foremost about personal independence. Pashtuns of the hills pride themselves on their freedom from authority and on their social equality. In principle, no Pashtun male may tell any other adult Pashtun male what to do. Unlike their neighbors the Baluchis, for example,

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50. Carl Robichaud, “Afghanistan’s Three Legal Systems,” *Afghanistan Watch*, January 9, 2007, [http://www.afghanistanwatch.org/rule\\_of\\_law/index.html](http://www.afghanistanwatch.org/rule_of_law/index.html).



who invest their tribal *sardars* with many of the leadership powers of a traditional tribal chief, any sort of external direction is not merely abhorrent to Pashtuns, but lies beyond their mental compass. Given the Pashtuns' communal responsibility, in which all extended family members share equally in the consequences for the actions of each individual, and the collective nature of group decisionmaking, the strong sense of male freedom is more about freedom from being ordered what to do than freedom to do what he pleases.

The position of the khan and the malik in Pashtun hill society is often misunderstood in this regard. The khan of a clan, typically an older patriarch who has acquired a combination of land, wealth, battle honors, wives, and offspring, is only a *primus inter pares*. He is venerated but cannot give orders to anyone outside his immediate family.<sup>51</sup> Nor can a malik, who carries considerable weight in council and village affairs but is essentially a democratically selected spokesman for the clan, a position that in some cases is hereditary. Pashtun tribal society is thus inherently resistant to externally or internally imposed hierarchical order as a fundamental social value.<sup>52</sup> With its own conflict resolution mechanisms, Pashtun hill society is one in which government and externally imposed order are not simply anathema but the antithesis of what is good.

After personal freedom, Pashtunwali demands that a man have an exaggerated sense of personal honor. Although there is no word in Pashto for the abstract Western concept of "honor," the word *nang*, representing a man's obligation to protect the inviolability of his person, his property, and his women, best captures this concept. In the past, this has created a great deal of tension between Pashtuns and states attempting to establish their own rule of law. The very concept of justice is wrapped up in a Pashtun's maintenance of his honor and his independence from external authority. Action that must be taken to preserve honor but that breaks the laws of a state would seem perfectly acceptable to a Pashtun. In fact, his honor would demand it.<sup>53</sup>

The confluence of independence, consensus, and honor also creates a social dynamic in which military leadership is a temporary appointed position. The individual selected to lead a clan's military force, or *lashkar*, is designated by

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51. This is somewhat less true among the nomadic, or Kuchi, Pashtun, among whom the khan has a stronger, but not absolute, voice in clan affairs.

52. During the colonial era, the British recognized that this lack of tribal chiefs among the Pashtuns made the Sandeman system much more difficult to implement, as it made them almost impossible to co-opt as a group. Only among the neighboring Ghurghusht Pashtun tribes of the Pishin Hills and the Zhob region immediately to the west of the Baluchis was the Sandeman system exported with any modest results.

53. Allen, *Soldier Sahibs*, p. 119.

consensus based on a number of factors, only one of which may be demonstrated tactical prowess. Males agree to follow the military leadership of this appointed member of their clan because the position is temporary and because they had a say in the selection process. It is not, however, honorable for a man to fight under another clan's leadership. Thus the largest operational military unit that may be formed under ordinary circumstances is the *khel*, which will fight, as Olivier Roy noted, until it reaches its tribal boundaries and then will stop.<sup>54</sup> The sole exception to this is a holy war. It is not dishonorable to fight for a charismatic mullah who is seen to have received divine inspiration to carry forward the banner of Islam. Thus, Pashtunwali creates a conservative dynamic in which large-scale warfare and social change take place only under religious leadership—such as that of the Taliban's Mullah Omar.

The third essential value of Pashtunwali is *badal*, which can mean both "exchange" and "revenge." In a *badal* wedding, for example, two brides are effectively "exchanged," one from each family for a son of the other. But it also means "exchange" in the sense of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." If a man suffers a dishonor, *badal* for that loss of *nang* must follow, or he will lose face and social status to the point of becoming an outcast. Revenge may take time: as one Pashtun proverb goes, "I took my revenge after a hundred years, and I only regret that I acted in haste." Indeed, it may take generations to avenge the wrong, but retribution will be the focus of the family's life until honor is recouped.

The fourth precept of Pashtunwali demands the provision of hospitality, protection, and refuge to all who require it. For the Pashtun, this behavior covers a spectrum, from the basic obligation to provide hospitality (*melmastia*) to anyone coming into his home, including strangers, to a remarkable form of chivalry toward one's enemies called *nanawatey*. *Nanawatey* literally means "going in," in the sense of surrendering oneself to the mercy of another person. It is of course a sign of weakness in the person who asks it, but, critically, it cannot honorably be refused, even if the seeker has done some grievous wrong to the person asked. Many frontier tales are told of a man continuing to grant *nanawatey* to someone discovered to be a mortal enemy, rather than lose his honor by failing in this absolute obligation. The provider must give shelter, food, drink, clothing, and personal protection to the seeker for an indeterminate but temporary period, even at the cost of his own life. U.S. officials who demanded that the Taliban turn over bin Laden after September 11 experi-

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54. Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

enced *nanawatey* without knowing it, when the Taliban refused on the grounds that bin Laden was a guest in Afghanistan, and thus effectively in an inviolable sphere of protection.

For centuries, these interlocking elements of the unwritten code of the Pashtun—freedom, honor, revenge, and chivalry—have defeated every effort to subdue the Pashtuns and supersede Pashtunwali with a more codified and centralized rule of law. Nevertheless, Western policymakers continue to ignore or to downplay the primacy of these fundamental cultural values in their efforts to shape strategies for southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, while the Taliban and al-Qaida use them for recruitment, shelter, and social mobilization.

### *The Insurgency in the Border Area and Beyond*

The Taliban and al-Qaida militants are using the lands of the Pashtun as a launching pad for attacks to destabilize both Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as a training ground for terrorist attacks worldwide. The border area has proven particularly vital to the Afghan Taliban, who form the bulk of the Afghan insurgency and operate from bases inside Pakistan. The Pashtun belt is also home to insurgent forces led by Afghan Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami (HIG) Party, the jihadi network of Maulawi Jalaluddin Haqqani (known as the Haqqani Faction), the Tora Bora Front, fighters from Hizb-i-Islami Khalis (HIK, now largely under the control of Haji Din Mohammed, the governor of Kabul Province), the growing Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan under Baitullah Mahsud,<sup>55</sup> as well as other foreign and domestic jihadi forces.<sup>56</sup> These insurgent forces represent an existential threat to the Karzai regime, a growing threat to the Pakistani government, and an enormous challenge to regional stability.<sup>57</sup>

Waziri and Mahsud Pashtun mullahs, who are harboring al-Qaida and supporting the Taliban, stepped up attacks against government forces in the fall of 2007, after scrapping the 2006 "peace agreement" in North Waziristan. After the Red Mosque siege in Islamabad, militant groups renounced the treaty and Taliban fighters in Pakistan proclaimed an all-out guerrilla war against the

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55. Imtiaz Ali and Craig Whitlock, "Taliban Commander Emerges as Pakistan's 'Biggest Problem': Radical Accused in Bhutto's Death Has Quickly Gathered Power, *Washington Post*, January 10, 2008.

56. For an assessment of the cross-border nature of the Afghan insurgency, see International Crisis Group, "Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No Quick Fixes," Asia Report, No. 123 (November 2006).

57. See Johnson, "On the Edge of the Big Muddy."

Pakistani Army.<sup>58</sup> Suicide bombings, indirect fire attacks, ambushes, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have targeted soldiers and police with unprecedented frequency and sophistication.<sup>59</sup> In August 2007 a battalion of more than 300 Pakistani Army soldiers together with nine of their officers, including a lieutenant colonel, surrendered to militants without firing a shot, an event without parallel in the sixty-year history of the Pakistani Army. The frontier town of Tank remains under siege. Throughout the Pashtun belt, an average of more than one girls' school a day was burned down or bombed in 2007, a rate faster than they can be built, replaced, or repaired. In Afghanistan, where the U.S. Agency for International Development has built hundreds of schools since 2001, the Taliban burned down 1,089 from 2005 to 2007.<sup>60</sup>

The radicalization has metastasized far beyond the FATA into Afghanistan, Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, the Punjab, and the Sind. In the Swat District, once an international tourist haven known as the "Switzerland of Asia," the Pakistani Army has been engaged in pitched battles with heavily armed insurgents since December 2007 in an attempt to retake the area from another charismatic religious leader, Maulana Fazlullah, nicknamed "Maulana Radio" for his pirate all-jihad format FM radio station preaching Islamic revolution against the state. As with pronouncements about the success of the peace deals in the FATA, all reports of progress in Swat should be subjected to rigorous ground-sourced analytical scrutiny. (Parts of the U.S. government seem all too eager, however, to accept at face value the sincerity of both information from, and alliance with, the ISI.) The assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 by extremists in the army headquarters town of Rawalpindi was yet another tragic indication of their growing reach and ability to penetrate Pakistani security.

Most alarmingly, in late 2004 the Talibanization of the north began to assume aspects of a more global character. Tactics used widely by Iraqi insurgents and al-Qaida fighters in Iraq started to appear in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area and have since spread widely. Intelligence analysts believe this is evidence of an al-Qaida-affiliated information network linking jihadist movements in multiple theaters of operation with loose operational coordination on a global scale and of a capability to move at least small numbers of person-

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58. Griff Witte and Imtiaz Ali, "Pakistan Truce Appears Defunct: Insurgents Strike Police, Troops; At Least 44 Die," *Washington Post*, July 16, 2007.

59. See Griff Witte and Imtiaz Ali, "Fighting Intensifies in Pakistani Tribal Area: Officials Say 19 Insurgents Killed in Clash with Army," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2007.

60. Jason Straziuso, "Bush Ignores Afghan School Violence," *Seattle Times*, January 30, 2008; and "Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan," *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 18, No. 6(C) (July 2006), <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/afghanistan0706/index.htm>.

nel from one operational theater to another. Taliban members known to have participated in the fighting in Iraq have been killed by coalition forces in Afghanistan, as have jihadis from other countries, including Chechens, Uzbeks, and even a few Turks. The entire border area has been wracked by a sharp increase in suicide attacks, roadside bombings with the use of improved and more deadly IEDs, and the executions of “spies.”<sup>61</sup> In 2006 Afghanistan suffered an algebraic increase in violence, including 139 suicide attacks—a fourfold increase over 2005—and approximately 1,600 incidents of IEDs—triple the numbers for 2005.<sup>62</sup> The year 2007 continued the steady, unbroken upward trend of insurgent violence in Afghanistan since 2002.

More significant than the novelty of some of these technologies and tactics is the fact that they are foreign to traditional Afghan mores and contradict Pashtun tribal and religious values.<sup>63</sup> This worrisome development suggests a growing linkage between elements of the global jihad and the emergence of a transnational jihadi culture. An analysis of Taliban *shabnamah* (night letters), which forms a major tactical component of the Taliban’s information and psychological operations campaigns, suggests that “the Afghan insurgency might very well be morphing into a campaign with more transnational concerns.”<sup>64</sup>

During the entire Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, there was not a single confirmed suicide bombing against Soviet military forces or their family members. The first such attack in Afghanistan was committed by two Arabs against Ahmad Shah Massoud, military leader of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, on September 9, 2001. Even today, few of the suicide bombers are Pashtuns born and raised in the tribal areas. The Taliban has essentially outsourced this operational requirement to al-Qaida, via a network of extremist mosques in the Middle East and Pakistan that provide operational centers from which to identify and recruit youths who have become isolated from their traditional tribal support networks. Many are in fact specifically targeted because they are adrift from their tribal moorings, having grown up on the streets of Karachi or in refugee camps where family and tribal structures have collapsed. Recruits for suicide bomb-

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61. “Taliban Hunt Spies, Target Kabul with Iraq-Style Tactics,” Agence France-Presse, June 21, 2007.

62. “Rising Violent Tactics Prevent Reconstruction of Afghanistan,” Afghan Voice Agency, March 19, 2007.

63. Griff Witte, “Suicide Bombers Kill Dozens in Afghanistan: Violence in South Is Seen as Message to NATO,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 2006. For a chronology of suicide bombings in Afghanistan, see the website of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, <http://www.rferl.org>.

64. Thomas H. Johnson, “The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters),” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (September 2007), p. 331.

ings are frequently unemployed or underemployed; some are mentally unstable; and a significant number have physical disabilities.<sup>65</sup>

In Pakistan's FATA and NWFP, the accelerating use of other imported tactics, such as attacks with IEDs, is another indicator of this trend. Taliban information campaign themes too have shifted, to highlight military capabilities and political goals, a trend that likewise seems to be borrowed from the Iraqi conflict. The late and unlamented Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah, killed in 2007 by coalition forces, was at the forefront of one such campaign. He frequently appeared in extensive interviews as part of propaganda video productions released by studios such as as-Sahab and Labyak. Dadullah was also featured in exclusive coverage on the satellite channel al-Jazeera.<sup>66</sup> Dadullah's efforts were apparently intended to justify and glorify Iraqi-style insurgent tactics, and to promote Taliban credibility and support on a regional basis.<sup>67</sup> Significantly, shortly before his death, Dadullah started using the term "fedayeen" in Pashto-language interviews to refer to the numerous suicide bombers he had allegedly recruited. In addition, al-Jazeera's translated coverage of Dadullah used the term "sacrificial operations" instead of "martyrdom operations."<sup>68</sup> The migration of Arabic terms such as "intifada" and "fedayeen," long associated with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to the Afghan theater is another indication of a Taliban merger with transnational radical elements. The ideologue behind introducing these concepts among the Taliban leadership is reportedly Ayman al-Zawahiri.

### *The Unintended Consequences of Border Politics*

To understand how the Taliban and associated groups were able to reach this powerful position, it is necessary to examine the border politics that gave rise to them, beginning with the creation of the boundary line itself. The Durand line, which was negotiated and formalized in 1893, was drawn by a team of British surveyors, led by Sir Mortimer Durand, to create a boundary between colonial British India and Afghanistan. To a great extent, the line followed the contours of convenient geographical features, as well as the existing limits of British authority, rather than tribal borders. It divided the homelands of the

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65. United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan (2001–2007)* (Kabul: UNAMA, September 2007).

66. "Mullah Omar Has Given the 'Green Light' for Deadly Attacks," *al-Firdaws*, February 27, 2007.

67. See Center for International Issues Research, "Mullah Dadullah Suggests Taliban Poised for Major Offensive in 2007" (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, January 17, 2007).

68. "Dadullah: 'Spring Offensive Is Imminent,'" *Afgha.com*, February 22, 2007, <http://www.afgha.com/?q=node/1983>.

Pashtun tribes nearly equally between Afghanistan and Pakistan, effectively cutting the Pashtun nation in half. This largely imaginary boundary has been viewed since its inception with contempt and resentment by Pashtuns on both sides of the line. As a practical matter, the border is unenforced and unenforceable. In some places the position of the line is disputed; in others it is inaccessible to all but trained mountain climbers; in still others it cuts through the middle of villages and even through individual homes.

The majority of the Pashtun tribes and clans that control the frontier zones of eastern and southern Afghanistan along the Durand line have never accepted the legitimacy of what they believe to be an arbitrary and capricious boundary. During the colonial period, Kabul treated its border areas with India as a kind of Afghan Appalachia, while the British colonial officials on the other side resigned themselves to the uncontrollability of the heart of the tribal areas. The issue of what to do with the tribal areas was never resolved by the British. Their frontier problems were handed over to India in 1947 on the eve of independence and partition. Although the tribes agreed in a plebiscite to be part of Pakistan, the boundary line became a political football and a major source of tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan after 1948.

Afghanistan opposed Pakistan's entry into the United Nations because it claimed that its border with Pakistan was not valid. Kabul argued correctly and with considerable legal acumen that the original treaty establishing the Durand line as the border was signed under duress. Afghanistan also claimed, with less legal validity, that the treaty was signed by a state that no longer existed. (The treaty obligations of British India with respect to international boundaries remained binding upon its successor states). In 1949 an Afghan *loya jirga* declared the Durand line invalid.<sup>69</sup> From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Afghan governments in which Minister Mohammed Daoud (later President Daoud, after his coup that sent the late King Zahir Shah into exile in 1972) played a leading role used the idea of an independent Pashtun state, to be called "Pashtunistan," as leverage against successive Pakistani governments. The Pakistanis for their part sought to bring Afghanistan into their sphere of influence to extend Pakistan's "strategic depth."

Landlocked, heavily dependent on Pakistan for imports and access to the sea, and badly outmatched economically and militarily, Afghanistan had little other leverage to exert. So it continues to play the Pashtunistan card, threatening the fragile Pakistani state—in the wake of the cathartic loss of its eastern province to the newly independent Bangladesh in 1971—with the similar loss

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69. A *loya jirga* is a traditional Afghan grand council where tribal elders meet to solve a significant problem.



of much of its northern territory into a new Pashtun state. (That much of southern Afghanistan would likely also have been pulled away into the new Pashtunistan, making the policy suicidal for the Afghan state, appears to have occurred to neither side.) To the Pakistani government, the specter of the fragmentation of the entire country—an artificial construct sharing nothing more than a common religion to begin with—seemed real indeed.

Afghanistan sought to increase the pressure on Pakistan by creating “Pashtunistan madrassas” in the border areas.<sup>70</sup> These were boarding schools where Afghan and transborder Pakistani schoolboys wore uniforms with a miniature flag of Pashtunistan on their sleeves and said a pledge of allegiance to the flag of Pashtunistan in their schoolyards each morning. A major square in Kabul was renamed “Pashtunistan Square.” Although the madrassas are long gone, the idea of Pashtunistan remains strong in Pakistan’s secular Pashtun political party, the Awami National Party (ANP). The ANP is led by Asfandiyar Wali Khan, and represents the political descendent of the Khudai Khidmatgar (“Red Shirt”) movement of the legendary Abdul Ghafar Khan, the “Frontier Gandhi.”<sup>71</sup> Short of independence, the ANP continues to agitate for the creation of a new Pashtun province to be called Pushtunkhwa (“Land of Pashtuns”), which would incorporate the NWFP, the FATA, Punjab’s Attock and Mianwali Districts, and northeastern Baluchistan, all prominent Pashtun areas.<sup>72</sup> One popular bumper sticker in Peshawar in 2007 read “NWFP = Name Wanted for Province.”<sup>73</sup>

Many Pakistanis, prone to see the sinister hand of India behind all Pakistani misfortunes, are convinced that the ANP is funded by the Indian government as a countermeasure to Pakistani support for insurgent groups in the Kashmir region, and dismissed it as a fringe party. The ANP surprised many observers in February 2007, however, with a victory over the once-invincible MMA Party in elections in Bajaur and swept into power in the NWFP in February 2008. Border politics are not dead in Afghanistan either. Afghan President Karzai has stated that he does not accept the border demarcation because “it has raised a wall between the two brothers.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, any other border policy position would be political suicide in Kabul. In short, the Durand line is accepted as a valid legal boundary by almost no one in the border region.

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70. Madrassas usually have a strong religious component to their curriculum.

71. See, for example, Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the Northwest Frontier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

72. See “Renaming of NWFP as Pushtunkhwa Demanded,” *Dawn.com*, February 22, 2003, <http://www.dawn.com/2003/02/23/nat13.htm>.

73. This was observed by the authors during a research trip to Peshawar in March 2007.

74. Quoted in “Durand Line Serves as a Line of Hate: Karzai,” *AfghanNews.net*, February 19, 2006.

The notion of Pashtunistan for the Pashtuns (who constitute the largest ethnic group in the world without a nation-state) has never had any real international support. Afghanistan's policy of promoting such an entity, however, has had far-reaching unintended consequences, of which the United States' latest and largest foreign policy dilemma is the most recent manifestation. To counter the growing threat of Pashtun nationalism and the potential secession of Pashtunistan following the Bangladesh debacle, successive Pakistani governments, formalized by President Gen. Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in 1977, launched a different social force as a political counterweight: conservative Islam.

Thus was born a massive experiment in social engineering in northern Pakistan. Beginning in the early 1970s, the Pakistani government embarked on the construction of thousands of conservative madrassas in Pashtun areas, funded by private Saudi sources that emphasized Islam over ethnic identity. Slowly but steadily, Pakistani governments began to invest the scarcely literate mullahs of the rural areas with more political weight, empowering them and their ulema shuras at the expense of the tribal elders, khans, and maliks. Even so, such cultural meddling was unlikely to have any significant lasting impact on tribal behavior over such a wide area, barring some kind of huge social upheaval that would undermine the existing tribal structures. That upheaval came in 1979, when Soviet tanks rolled across the Amu Darya River at Termez, eventually killing more than 1 million Pashtuns, driving 3 million more into exile, and devastating the social fabric of tribal society. It was the response to the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan that dramatically accelerated Pakistan's social experiment and ultimately spun it out of control.

That response was largely in the form of massive covert international support for the jihad against the Soviets. To facilitate it, the Pakistani government recognized seven Afghan Sunni mujahideen parties, which became known as the "Peshawar Seven." (There were also three unrecognized and unsupported Shiite mujahideen parties composed mostly of Afghan Hazaras and Qizilbashis.) Six of the seven were composed almost entirely of Pashtuns, in which Ghilzais and Karlanris played a dominant role. Because large-scale military organization among the Pashtun can occur only under religious leadership, all six had religious leaders in overall control. (Even in the seventh, Jamiat-i-Islam, which increasingly became the party of non-Pashtun Sunnis as the war progressed, theologian Burhanuddin Rabbani had considerable operational influence.)

The United States and Saudi Arabia poured \$7.2 billion of covert aid into the jihad against the Soviets, the vast majority of which was channeled by the ISI, with the acquiescence of the Central Intelligence Agency, to the most radical

religious elements, deliberately marginalizing Durrani Pashtuns and those parties with a less radical, more nationalist political vision for the future of Afghanistan. Foreign militants flowed into Pakistan for training and then deployed into Afghanistan. Among them were several thousand funded and paid by Osama bin Laden.<sup>75</sup> Relationships were forged that continue to plague the United States. Worse, Pashtun tribal society became increasingly radicalized. After the Soviets withdrew, the social fabric of the Pashtuns was further shredded by returning commanders and fighters who set themselves up in many cases as warlords outside the authority of the tribal elders. The result was anarchy, as mujahideen groups, warlords, and common criminals fought over the carcass of Afghanistan.

When it became evident to Islamabad and the ISI that first, their favorite mujahideen commander, Ghilzai Pashtun Islamist (and HiG Party leader) Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, would never gain political control over Afghanistan and, second, that the anarchy in Afghanistan was antithetical to a policy of strategic depth as well as potentially destabilizing for Pakistan, the Taliban was born. Beginning from a minor local movement in Kandahar Province in 1994 with few weapons and even less money, with massive covert Pakistani financial and military support, the Taliban rose to power and took over Kabul in 1996.<sup>76</sup> The Taliban furthered the process of deconstructing the dominant role of the tribal elders in the rural areas from 1996 to 2001 and supplanting them with ulema shuras.

Thus, since the 1970s, in pursuit of domestic stability and its foreign policy interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan has deliberately deconstructed much of the 1,000-year-old tribal order in the Pashtun areas. In retrospect, this social engineering to empower radical Muslim extremists, aided and abetted for a decade by the CIA to bleed the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in retribution for its involvement in Vietnam, was incredibly short-sighted. While the decline of traditional tribal governance in the short run helped recruit many mujahideen, it also led to the radicalization of the tribal areas and the opening of the FATA to jihadist movements and radicals such as bin Laden.

There was no absence of sage counsel speaking against the creation of such a Frankenstein monster: the late Afghan king, Zahir Shah (then in exile in

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75. See Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and Thomas H. Johnson, "Financing Afghan Terrorism: Thugs, Drugs, and Creative Movements of Money," in Jeanne Giraldo and Harold A. Trinkunas, eds., *Terrorism Financing and State Responses: A Comparative Perspective* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 93–114.

76. Ahmed Rashid discusses the evolution of Pakistani support for radical Islamists and the Taliban as part of a comprehensive Afghan strategy, in Rashid, *The Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 84, 186–187.

Rome), Hamid Karzai (then in contact with the CIA station in Peshawar), and officials within the U.S. State Department, among others, all warned against the dangers of arming, training, and funding radical Islamic extremists on such a massive scale.<sup>77</sup> They were ignored.

Many of the original architects of the Islamicization of northern Pakistan may have believed that they could eventually re-create the traditional malik/khan/elder-based social system once the Pashtunistan threat had burned itself out, and later, when the Soviets had been defeated and driven out of Afghanistan. If so, they were betrayed by the ISI agents who ran the mujahideen program, who saw a continued domestic and foreign policy use for the radical movement in Afghanistan and the Kashmir, which they believed they could manipulate. Thus, after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, official support to the radicals continued, in the form of covert assistance and an overtly uneven political playing field in which the radical political parties such as the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) and the MMA were given every advantage, while moderate and nationalist parties such as the ANP were systematically subverted and harassed. The policy of politicizing the ulema continued, and the social fabric of the tribal areas further disintegrated.

In 2008 the monster created in this ill-conceived experiment is virtually out of control. Apart from short-term tactical military successes, the political momentum of radicalization in the north appears to have gone beyond the power of the Pakistani state to contain it, let alone suppress it, which suggests that the odds of the radical fundamentalist genie being put back into the bottle are slim. The near-term policy consequences of this ongoing radicalization, and the failure of the Pakistani government to prohibit refuge for the Taliban as well as foreign jihadis in the FATA, are the continued destabilization of southern Afghanistan, the spread of the Taliban insurgency, and the further subversion of democracy in Pakistan. This in turn has contributed to Washington's mild but growing criticism of Pakistan's border policies since mid-2007 and a slow but discernable drift of U.S.-Pakistani relations at the strategic level. The long-term consequences of this process of radicalization, if left unchecked, are potentially devastating for the United States.

## *Conclusion*

A century ago, the volatility of a particular section of the borderlands between South and Central Asia was a regional problem; a difficult but localized challenge to generations of British soldiers and administrators on India's

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77. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*.

Northwest Frontier. In an era of international jihad and networked nonstate terrorism, however, the same mountain fastnesses and social code that perplexed the Raj now represent a truly global threat. The most remote place on earth has become the most dangerous. The attacks of September 11, the London subway bombings, the March 11 Madrid bombings, and most of the other recent strikes at Western civilization were planned and trained for there, and more are being planned there at this very minute. "War, red war," Kipling's border thief promised,<sup>78</sup> and it has come.

Yet the United States has no long-term security problems with the Baluchis, the Chitralis, the Tajiks, the Nuristanis, or any of the myriad tribal groups along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, save one: the Pashtuns. The challenge for U.S. security interests in South Asia is thus, at its center, not a social problem, or a religious problem, or a generic "tribal" problem. It is a unique cultural problem, which is especially problematic for a country whose ethos and foreign policymaking paradigm is the national sublimation of culture in favor of assimilation through democracy. Alone among the many peoples and cultures of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, however, it is the Pashtun people who have proven both susceptible to religious extremist movements and resistant to the imposition of external governance. The reason is that the fragile equilibrium of social order in this uniquely segmentary, acephalous, and inherently conservative society yields to religious zealotry whenever weakened from the inside or pressured excessively from the outside, precisely because of its lack of unitary leadership and the unbending nature of its compulsory social code, Pashtunwali.

For the United States, the short-term solution for bringing the Pashtun lands back from the radical brink is to strengthen and rebuild the tribal structures from the inside while reducing the pressures on them from the outside, rather than the current policy of doing the opposite. Exerting external pressure on Pashtun tribal leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan has done nothing to lessen the continuing radicalization of the Pashtun tribes, and in fact has had a deleterious effect. The answer is not to ignore the culture, or to attempt to further subvert the position of the tribal elders and maliks whose collective control is the only stabilizing force the region has ever known. In Afghanistan, rather than applying external pressure by seeking to extend the reach of the anathematic central government, an action that historically has fomented insurrection among the proto-insurgent Pashtun, the United States and the international community should be doing everything in their means to empower

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78. Rudyard Kipling, *The Lament of the Border Cattle Thief* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1911), p. 174.

the tribal elders and restore the traditional balance to the system. One way to start in Afghanistan would be to amend the constitution to elect provincial governors and deputy governors directly, rather than the current method of having outsiders imposed upon the Pashtun provinces by fiat from Kabul.

The Pashtun tribal belt encompasses a culture in which broad, lasting social change happens only with the consent of rural religious authority. This necessitates a policy of gradually returning the mullahs to their traditional role of spiritual advisers and mentors to the people rather than that of community decisionmakers. When the Pashtuns are under social pressure, jihad is born at the turning point in which that religious consent morphs into leadership. Yet stability is possible. Southern Afghanistan, for example, was neither radical nor unstable in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, when the national government was invisible in the tribal lands south of Ghazni, west of Jalalabad, and east of Kandahar, but a foreign visitor could have walked unmolested from Kandahar to Kabul relying entirely on hospitality along the way. The Pashtun homelands are not inherently lawless lands of constant warfare, Victorian pulp fiction and modern blogosphere hyperbole notwithstanding.

The next step is to bring rapid improvements in everyday people's lives in the Pashtun belt, where in many places one child in three still dies before her fifth birthday. These improvements must begin to be felt quickly across a broad sweep of the Pashtun lands, before spreading Talibanization can further consolidate its position among the people and make their denial a self-fulfilling prophecy. The level of nonsecurity-related (i.e., police and army) aid actually reaching the Pashtun people in Afghanistan since the U.S. invasion has been shockingly low, less than \$5 per Pashtun per year,<sup>79</sup> an astonishingly miserly effort considering the critical strategic nature of the region. As suggested elsewhere, military tactics, too, such as the preeminence of intrusive sweep operations, the emphasis on the so-called kill/capture mission, and the indiscriminate use of airpower in inhabited areas have been extremely damaging to counterinsurgency efforts among a revenge-oriented people with a zero tolerance for insult and "collateral damage."<sup>80</sup> The military tactics of the

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79. The vast majority of U.S. aid goes to build the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police, and much of the remainder flows north, where security conditions make development easier. The foreign aid watchdog group Action Aid USA calculates that nearly 90 percent of U.S. aid is actually "phantom aid," money that never really leaves the United States, going instead to pay overhead costs and salaries. See Real Aid, *An Agenda for Making Aid Work*, 2006, <http://www.actionaidusa.org/Action%20Aid%20Real%20Aid.pdf>.

80. As one Pakistani diplomat noted, "When a child is killed in a [Pashtun] village, that village is lost for 100 years." Quoted in International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation," Asia Report, No. 62 (Kabul: International Crisis Group, August 2003). See also Johnson, "On the Edge of the Big Muddy," p. 124.

United States and its NATO allies must undergo a sweeping change in recognition of Pashtun cultural realities. Most U.S. soldiers deploying to Afghanistan still receive little or no cultural or language training.

Furthermore, because of the highly segmentary nature of rural Pashtun society, current U.S. and NATO attempts to administer and implement reconstruction and rural development from the provincial level, via Provincial Reconstruction Teams, instead of at the district level with District Reconstruction Teams, are doomed. Historically, all attempts to develop and improve the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan from the provincial level have failed. The current troop-to-task ratio is simply inadequate. Time is running out, and public perceptions of U.S. and NATO forces are edging ever closer to those of the Soviets in the Pashtun collective consciousness. It is probably already too late to prevent some political accommodation with the Taliban, at least in the south, by the Afghan government, but Pashtuns do not negotiate when in a position of relative strength or when they appear to be winning, as the all-Pashtun Taliban believe they are now.<sup>81</sup>

In Pakistan, the permissive conditions enabling the Taliban must be confronted, not with rhetoric and empty promises, but with action—and not vacillating, half-hearted measures, but strong and consistent Pakistani military action wherever required and at whatever cost. Because Pashtuns never negotiate from a position of strength, such negotiations and “peace deals” are simply seen as a sign of weakness by the radicals. The majority of the Pakistani people, however, detest the extremists, do not want the name of their country and its illustrious founder associated with terrorists and suicide bombers, and will accept more assertive military action in the north if it is done with cautious regard for innocent life. There was no great national outcry outside the already radicalized Pashtun areas against the commando action to remove the terrorists from the Red Mosque, for example—despite a massive MMA information campaign to create one—because the operation was transparently managed to demonstrate restraint, and every effort was made to protect the lives of the innocent by the Pakistani government.

Pakistan’s cynical “catch and release” program, with its transparent pattern of arrests of senior radical figures timed to coincide with high-level U.S. visits to Islamabad (who are usually released shortly after as the U.S. airplane is off the ground) demonstrates that Pakistan certainly knows where the ringleaders are, and could arrest or kill many of them at will. It is the will, not the intelli-

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81. See Ron Synovitz, “Afghanistan: A First Step toward ‘Turning’ Moderate Taliban?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 9, 2008, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/01/017e3914-08af-4ee1-af52-89a9f2ad15b0.html>.



gence, which is lacking, and it is long past time for the U.S. government to probe behind the assurances of friendship and alliance. Additional purging of ISI elements with long-standing links to the Taliban and other extremist groups will also be necessary. Only the Pakistanis can do this, however, and ultimately the long-term solution for Pakistan's ills is more democracy, not more U.S.-backed militarism.

While tough military operations to tamp down open rebellion are necessary in the short term, like Afghanistan the FATA represents a long-term challenge that will ultimately be solved only by massive rural development and education programs. The paltry U.S. foreign aid commitment to the FATA of \$75 million a year, or less than \$20 a year per FATA resident, while providing the Pakistani Army with nearly \$2 billion annually in military aid is, at best, a gross distortion of priorities, and is absurdly inadequate to begin this process in any case. Indeed, providing \$2 billion a year in development aid to the FATA and NWFP region and \$75 million a year to the Pakistani Army would go a lot further toward reducing anti-American jihadi fervor and improving the national security of the United States than the inverse currently in effect. But even with adequate resource levels, real rehabilitation of the Pashtun tribal structures will be a long and deliberate process. It has to start with discussion with the tribal leaders and moderate political parties of the region, not more craven obeisance to the most radical religious elements in the MMA. In the short term, this does mean a commitment to a strong Pakistani military presence in the FATA, including the willingness to see past the Indian bogeyman in order to redeploy troops now on the Indian border, because there can be no meaningful economic development or reassertion of traditional tribal forums without continuous, reliable security. This will require more regular forces with significantly more training in counterinsurgency. U.S. intervention with India, including diplomatic stimuli to pull India's troops back from its side of the border, would be helpful in this regard. The 2007 plan to provide U.S. training and assistance to the tribal paramilitary Frontier Corps is misguided, however. Since their inception a century ago, those units have always been poachers-turned-wardens, with well-recognized limits on their reliability; and today they are more deeply infiltrated and compromised by divided loyalties than ever before.<sup>82</sup> The Frontier Corps' problems have little to do with weapons and training, and U.S. troops recruited largely from the inner cities and

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82. Eric Schmitt, Mark Mazzetti, and Carlotta Gall, "U.S. Hopes to Arm Pakistani Tribes against Al Qaeda," *International Herald Tribune*, November 18, 2007, <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/11/19/america/19policy.php>.

trained for conventional warfare have little to teach rugged Pashtun hillmen about fighting in their own mountains in any case.

In the wake of the elections in Pakistan on February 18, 2008, the George W. Bush administration continues to admire the emperor's new clothes, issuing statements increasingly at odds with Pakistani public opinion in regard to President Musharraf's future, but his days in office are clearly numbered. Years of unconditional support and foreign policymaking based on personality and wishful thinking have left this White House with few options. The elections, however, were a triumph for democracy in South Asia, and the ANP's victory in NWFP presents the next U.S. administration with a historic opportunity to stabilize the frontier and begin to salvage the U.S. relationship with the Pashtun people. The clear rejection of the fundamentalist religious parties in favor of Pashtun nationalism has opened a window of opportunity for international leaders willing to understand the border and its people.

The tribal structures of Pakistan and Afghanistan have been wounded, but such an ancient culture cannot be eradicated in thirty years. However badly the building blocks of that culture are damaged, there remains a foundation on which Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other interested parties can begin to restore traditional Pashtun power structures and mores. Whether the cultural understanding, diplomatic acumen, and political will to foster, support, and underwrite such an endeavor exist in the United States and NATO remains to be seen. Ultimately, the fate of the Pashtun tribal territories will prove to be the greatest test of U.S. and NATO abilities. Should they fail, the consequences for the Pashtun, Afghanistan, Pakistan—and the West—will be far worse than anything previously endured.